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ABSTRACT

A year-long departmental evaluation at one college English department revealed that most sections of both pre-college English and regular English 101 emphasized form over content, structure over ideas, surface features over global, and this, at the expense of meaningful intellectual growth. When freshmen are plied with basic grammar books and with a series of disconnected readings, they are being deprived of the kind of learning that allows for abstraction and analytical thinking. Whether upper level literature courses or pre-college courses for developmental writers, the questions remains the same: How does an instructor provide a relevant context for composition with readings that serve as more than models of rhetorical modes, that have substance and coherence? The "role of social pressure and self-awareness" is the unifying theme that drove the selection of the reading in one thematically oriented course. It allowed for treatment of many "isms," such as racism, sexism, ageism, and challenged reductive thinking about them. Since most incoming freshmen are highly concerned with peer pressure and self-discovery, this thematic approach seemed to hold the most promise. At first readings served as a vehicle for subjective responses in journals; excerpts from these journals shows a level of personal engagement. Later such responses were fashioned into essays. (Contains list of course thematic readings, other course materials and 19 references.) (TB)

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NCTE Conference
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Presenter: Mary Segall
Session: G-18 2:00-3:15

Title: Celebrating Diversity: Providing Cultural Contexts for Freshman Composition

Over twenty years ago, George Stade of Columbia University bemoaned:

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> The split between the content of the essays and the content of the Freshman composition course is the main source of the schizophrenia that is everywhere the badge and stigma of Freshman English ... because the essays themselves are about a variety of subjects by a variety of writers, the half of the course they comprise is fragmented. The course does not reveal itself in stages. It boils down to this: the course we think of as having form for its content has no content at all (38).

More recently, Richard Larson in his Project on College Curricula in Composition, in which he surveyed over 240 colleges, found that "if the syllabi are a true indication of real classroom activities, too many Freshman writing programs ask students to write on wholly different topics from week to week."

A look a college basic writing programs can make for a rude awakening, since what George Stade and Richard Larson have described was true at my institution until not so long ago as well.

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After a year long departmental evaluation, I found that whether incoming students placed into pre-college English or our regular English 101, we were emphasizing form over content, structure over ideas, surface features over global, and this, at the expense of meaningful intellectual growth. I would argue that what is true for "regular" college Freshmen is just as true for developmental writers: when we ply them with basic grammar books and with a series of disconnected readings, we are depriving them of the kind of learning that allows for abstraction and analytic thinking.

A survey of recent, and not so recent, journal articles confirms that our local concerns are national concerns, that we have been and still are struggling with this issue on all levels in every state. For example, Min Zhan Lu in her essay "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing" found "limited influence on Basic Writing instruction, which continues to emphasize skills ...[and that] this view persists among Basic Writing teachers in the 1990's." She suggests that a contextual approach "could help students deal self-consciously with the threat of 'betrayal' [to their home cultures] especially if they fear and want to resist it" (889).

Patricia Bizzell in her article "Opinion: 'Contact Zones' and English Studies" looks at this issue in relation to upper level literary studies. She sees the literary cannon in the 1990's "creaking and groaning onward, in spite of widely acknowledged need to overhaul it in response to multiculturalism " (163). She

supports the premise that content is the basis for writing and that the content is necessary for meaningful writing. Bizzell uses Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "the contact zone" as a useful metaphor for providing a working conceptual framework for designing a new system of organizing approaches to teaching "diverse world literatures written in English" (165). Bizzell proposes literary studies "in terms of historically defined contact zones, moments when different groups within the society contend for the power to interpret what is going on" (167) and, thus, would allow for inclusion of any material relevant to the issue being contested. The benefits of her system would, in her view, (1) eliminate trying to "squeeze" new material into old inappropriate categories, and (2) would eliminate debate about relative expository or stylistic worth of authors, focusing instead on "rhetorical effectiveness of each writer in dealing with the matter in hand" (167).

Whether upper level literature courses or pre-college courses for developmental writers, the question still remains: How do we provide a relevant context for composition, with readings that serve as more than models of rhetorical modes, that have substance to encourage intellectual growth, that allow for development, critical thinking and writing, and that work in a pedagogically sound way to move the student from reader response to more analytic discourse? I would like to share with you one thematic approach to composition that has addressed those needs and has also offered the opportunity to broaden student understanding and appreciation of

diverse cultures. The "role of Social Pressure and Self-awareness" is the unifying theme that drove the selection of the reading in this thematic approach, (see handout for list of readings), which allowed for treatment of many isms, such as racism, sexism, ageism, and challenged reductive thinking about them.

Since most in-coming freshmen are highly concerned with peer pressure and self-discovery, this thematic approach seemed to hold the most promise. At first, the readings served as a vehicle for subjective responses which students kept in their journals. The journals, in turn, provided me with a window to view student engagement and comprehension from which we could then return to the text for a closer reading to improve comprehension, or move into small group activities to inquire into theme, tone, literary techniques, or logic of the readings. With each successive reading, the students found themselves referring back to previous readings to make comparisons or to draw distinctions between the various authors' degrees of insight, the amount and kind of peer pressure exerted, and the social acceptance or rejection of the author's values. For instance, after reading both "Shame" by Dick Gregory and "Salvation" by Langston Hughes, students were able to generate an impressive list of observations about the role of females in the authors' lives, the isolation each author felt from the community, and the loss of self-determination each author experienced. In this way, the rhetorical strategy of comparison and contrast had meaning and use within a conceptual framework, no

longer a mechanic exercise in rhetorical modes, or form without content as George Stade described.

From the widely adopted college handbook, The Bedford Handbook for Writers, 3rd edit, by Diane Hacker, St. Martin's Press, this is what the student reads:

> To compare two subjects is to draw attention to their similarities. To contrast is to focus on differences. Whether a comparison-contrast paragraph stresses similarities or differences, it may be patterned in one of two ways: (1) block style or (2) point by point. Write a paragraph using comparison-contrast on a topic of your choice. (87)

Again, the student is asked to make meaning from structure alone. Instead, the thematic approach allows us to more naturally move from subjective, expressive writing, to more academic or analytic writing. As students respond to thematically unified readings, they draw supporting evidence from the readings in order to articulate specific points (thus a more natural ways as well to teach use of sources and documentation). Academic discourse ceases to be an empty form to fill or to mimic simply to pass the course.

Finally, the thematic approach provides a chance to explore the causes and effects of prejudice in a less didactic way. As students discover recurrent motifs in the various readings, they register delight in the discovery (and sometimes even surprise at

the strength of their own reaction. An exploration of the degree of self-awareness of self-knowledge of the authors, the values expressed by the authors, and the social matrix of the author's experience all serve as a kind of paradigm for the student's own exploration and discovery. Perhaps this growth is best expressed by the students themselves:

Here is a passage from Maya Angelou's "Grandmother's Victory," one of the reading in this thematic unit to which students responded, first in an informal journal, and then in a more formal paper. In this excerpt, Angelou recounts how she, as a ten year old, watched from behind a screen door as her deeply religious grandmother, standing on the front porch, was accosted by a group of 'powhitetrash kids" (the poor white land squatters on the grandmother's land):

> Before the girls got to the porch I heard their laughter cracking and popping like pine logs in a cooking stove...they came finally to stand on the ground in from of Momma. At first they pretended seriousness. Then one of them wrapped her right arm in the crook of her left, pushed out her mouth and started to hum. I realized she was aping my grandmother. Another said, 'Naw, Helen, you ain't standing like her. This here's it.' ... Another laughed, 'Your mouth ain't pooched out enough. It's like this.' ... They all moved backward from the porch,

> still watching Momma. For an awful second I thought they were going to throw a rock at Momma, who seemed to have turned into stone herself. But the big girl turned her back, bent down and put her hands on the ground -- she didn't pick up anything. She simply shifted her weight and did a hand stand. Her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky. Her dress fell down around her shoulders, and she had on no drawers. The slick pubic hair made a triangle where her legs came together. (162)

This is one student's journal response to Angelou's passage. As you hear it, you will hear the raw material from which this student would later refine a more critical paper on narrative point of view and his own growth in awareness of historical context:

> As I finished reading the last sentence of "Grandmother's Victory," I felt sort of angry at society in general... It usually takes a well-written piece of writing to get my emotions running high, and "Grandmother's Victory" was a perfect example of this. I couldn't believe how hostile people could be, such as when the older girl did a hand stand, and she had a dress on with no underpants. Now if she did that today, she would be in trouble with the law. Also a part that really blew my whistle was when one child was making fun of Momma's lips. Angelou did a fantastic

> job of describing how the children acted, because I really got pissed off. The only adjustment I would have made was at the end when Angelou as a little girl was telling the story. I though maybe if the grandmother told it, we could see what her feelings were and we could also find out why she was nice to the children when they left. It really upsets me when I think about it now.

Several features are worth comment in this student's response: First, he is struggling, just as the then ten year old Angelou did, with trying to understand the grandmother's passive resistance in the face of such humiliating treatment. Second, he is hovering in the dissonance created by his own socially privileged background in conflict with his strong immediate identification with Angelou's rage as she experienced racism.

Clearly, this journal response is self-expressive and this student will need to negotiate his gut response with an academic audience that will expect him to convey his outrage in terms less vernacular than "pissed off." But for all these conflicts this student will face as a writer, he is <u>engaged</u> with something to say, <u>now</u> searching for a form to fit his content, rather than the reverse.

I would like to report that this thematic approach is a panacea, that it has resolved all our conflicting needs, but that would be, as Huck Finn says, "a stretcher." Not every student discovers

connections between the readings or welcomes non directive tasks. Some would prefer the tradition classroom where they are given grammar exercises to complete or where there are factual questions with specific answers. What I can report to you is that the majority, myself included, would never wish to go back to our old approach again.

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HANDOUTS

Selected Readings

for

Cultural Contexts

for

Composition

November 19, 1994
M. Segall

THEMATIC UNIT

Discovery and Self-Knowledge: Social Pressure in Prejudice.

Readings:

Allport, Gordon.	"The Language of Prejudice"
Angelou, Maya.	"Grandmother's Victory"
Chief Joseph.	"I Am Tired of Fighting"
Cole, Diane.	"Don't Just Stand There"
Dell, Floyd.	"We're Poor"
Gilman, C.P.	"Yellow Wall-Paper"
Guilder, George.	"Why Men Marry"
Gregory, Dick.	"Shame"
Hughes, Langston.	"Salvation"
Hurston, Zora Neale.	"How It Feels To Be Colored Me"
Kozol, Jonathan.	"Human Cost of an Illiterate Society"
Lawrence, Charles R.	"On Racist Speech"
Main, Thomas J.	"What We Know About the Homeless"
O'Connor, Flannery.	"Revelation"
Orwell, George.	"Shooting an Elephant"
Parks, Gordon.	"Flavio's Home"
Perrin, Noel.	"The Androgynous Man"
Reese, Michael.	"Homosexuality: One Family's Affair"
Singer, Isaac Bashevis.	"Gimple the Fool"
Syfers, Judy.	"I Want a Wife"
Welty, Eudora.	"A Worn Path"
Zinsser, William.	"The Right to Fail"

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Modes of Instruction:

Presentational: traditional
clear objectives
study of models
assignments to imitate a pattern
feedback from teacher

Naturalistic: 50% more effective than presentational mode
generalized objectives
writing for peers
feedback from peers
opportunities to revise
emphasis on free writing
high level interaction among students

Environmental: clear, specific objectives
materials and problems selected to engage students with each other in specific process in particular aspect of writing
activities conducive to high level of peer interaction on specific task
teacher structures tasks
4 times more effective than presentational
3 times more effective than naturalistic

Other Conclusions:

1. Presentational mode neglects necessary processes.

2. Little evidence to show free writing in itself is effective.

3. Approaches focused on procedural knowledge (sentence combining, inquiry) are more successful than declarative or presentational approaches.

4. Although grammar instruction has little effect on the quality of writing, some minimal grammatical knowledge is necessary to adher to conventions of punctuation.

5. Environmental modes brings together the teacher, student, process, and product in the most balanced, structured way. It moves beyond process without abandoning it.

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Discussion

1. Back to the future survey:

   Your experience in Freshman Composition EN 101. How were you taught? Most salient memory? Writing assignments? Texts?

2. Survey of college rhetoric readers:

   What drives the selections in your texts?

   What unifying themes have you used?

   How were they received by your students?

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Add to Works Cited:

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